

from our viewpoint...

Move state offices out to hinterlands

Let's revisit a proposition championed by the late Sen. Stan Clark, who thought the state should have more offices out in the hinterlands and fewer in Topeka.

Sen. Clark once suggested that, instead of buying up more buildings in Topeka to house an every-expanding work force, the state should start farming out its work to places like Oberlin and Atwood.

With modern communications, he argued, most jobs could be done in Colby or Hoxie as well as they could in Topeka. Some might argue that the state would get better workers and a better product out in rural Kansas.

Half a century ago, the state built an office tower in Topeka. Today, the government spills out into two more office buildings and a passel of other space.

There's no reason why all that money has to be spent in Topeka. Some of it could be creating economic development in rural counties bypassed by state government in recent years.

There's a whole litany of crimes against the rural economy the state should atone for: closing Social and Rehabilitation Services offices, highway shops in smaller towns, consolidating Highway Patrol dispatch centers, the list goes on.

Sure, that's the way utilities like Southwestern Bell (now the "new" AT&T) do business. Once Bell had operators and a business office in nearly every town; today those functions have been moved to Wichita, Tulsa, Dallas — or Bangalore.

But Ma Bell isn't run with tax money and has no responsibility to promote economic development. We all know how much she loves us.

The state of Kansas, though, the state in many ways has been a booster for rural decline. New highways concentrated traffic, drying up commerce along the two lanes across the state. Consolidations closed school, offices and services.

If we're interested in a stronger state economy, though, shouldn't we want the state to reverse that trend? Shouldn't we want every county in Kansas to be prosperous, not just a few?

Stan Clark thought so. He's only begun the fight before his untimely death in a prairie dust storm three years ago.

The rest of us should take up the torch.

A computer center in Atwood. An engineering office in Hill City. Maybe a prison in Oakley and a research center in Goodland.

Oh, here's an idea: welfare offices in every county where people can go down and apply in person for help. Maybe state service centers where people could get a variety of services at the county seat without a day-long drive to some consolidated office.

Someone will say state workers don't want to move out to the sticks. Too bad. Hire people who want to live here. Rural Kansas will be a lot more hip with jobs and people.

There are, last time we checked, lots of other jobs in Topeka for those who don't want to move. — Steve Haynes

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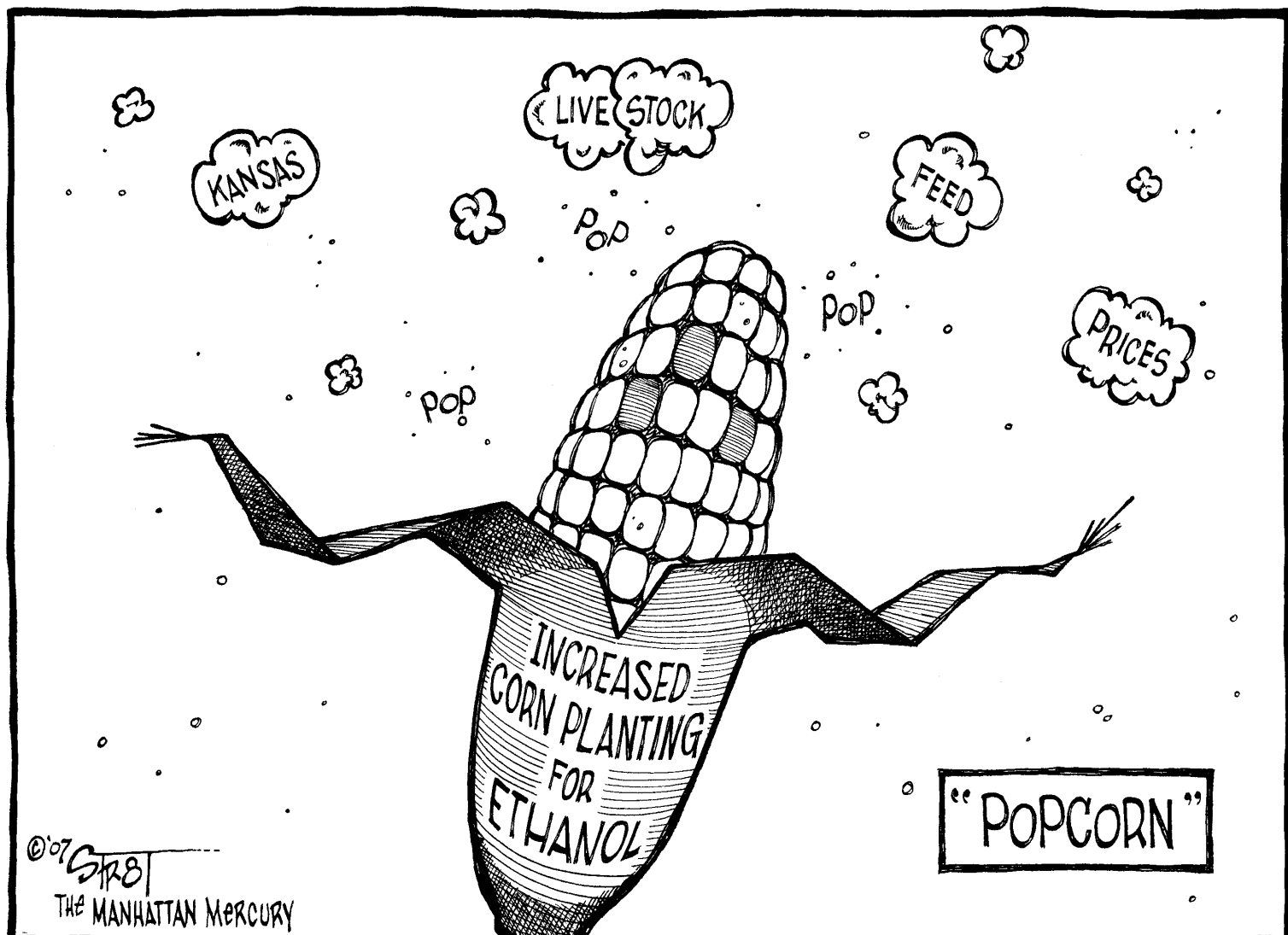
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Needed — more Irish humor

Thank goodness St. Patrick's Day is near. We sure could use some Irish humor about now.

We're in a nasty war, after all. Partisan politics are in high gear. And all our press cares about is the saga of Anna Nicole.

I prefer to think of Murphy instead. During the French Revolution, Murphy and two others were sentenced to death for spying. The executioner walked the first man to the guillotine. He asked the man if he wanted to lie on his stomach or his back.

The fellow said he wasn't afraid to die. He chose to lie on his back with a clear view of the blade. But when the executioner pulled the lever, the blade jammed. And because no man could be sentenced twice for the same crime, he was set free.

The second Irishman was given the same option. He chose to lie on his back. The blade jammed again and he was set free.

Then it was Murphy's turn. He, too, chose to lie on his back. But just as the executioner was about to pull the lever, Murphy yelled:

"Wait! I think I see what's causing the blade to jam."

St. Patrick's Day always brings out the gratitude in me — makes me remember how extraordinarily blessed my country is. Which reminds me of the one about Donahue.

He worked 80-hour weeks his whole life. After his children married and his wife died, he decided to enjoy life. He got a face-lift, a hair transplant and an expensive new car. He jumped in his car to drive into town one night. But on the way, he was hit by a truck and died



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• commentary

instantly.

When he arrived at the Pearly Gates, he approached St. Peter. "What's going on here?" he said. "I worked hard all of my life and when I finally go out to enjoy things, I get killed? How could you let such a thing happen?"

"Well, if you must know the truth, Donahue," said St. Peter, blushing, "I didn't recognize you."

St. Patrick's Day also makes me more civil toward my fellow man — more eager to promote brotherly love. Which reminds me of the one about McAlister. One Saturday night, he went to the pub and ordered three pints. When the bartender asked him why he wanted three, McAlister explained:

"I've got two brothers, one in America and one in Australia. Every Saturday night we go to our respective pubs, order three pints and drink with each other. Right now, they're sipping three pints, too."

McAlister continued his tradition for several months. But one Saturday he ordered only two pints.

"Sweet goodness," said the bartender, "did one of your brother's die?"

"The brothers are fine," said McAlister. "It's just that I quit drinking."

Flight passenger bill of rights

Due to a spate of recent negative publicity, the airline industry has embarked on a public relations blitz aimed at reversing the public's perception that flight service has sunk to the level of a winged Greyhound with holes in the floorboards.

Good luck.

I can't believe it took this long for people to finally flip out, because over the last couple of years we frequent flyers have become so accustomed to being treated like fleshy baggage that some of us have spontaneously sprouted handles.

JetBlue blamed their meltdowns on weather and overtaxed computers, but its problems are endemic of an industry that routinely treats its customers like mushrooms; kept in the dark and fed an especially fertile form of compost (in lieu of in-flight meals).

And it takes a threat by Congress to pass a legislated passenger bill of rights to goose the industry into running around promoting a series of non compulsory and voluntary programs whose implementation will last about as long as an igloo concession in the Gobi Desert.

They've pulled this penitentiary wool over our eyes before and will continue to just as long as they can convince us that they are concerned about anything but their bottom line.

You know the dance. An in-house publicist strides purposely to a podium and solemnly announces the airline is "really, really sorry and promises to try harder and will do everything in their power to make sure something like this or that or whatever happened never happens again. Ever. Honest."

And if it does, tough. Just stay out of their face, mister, and don't try complaining to a gate agent or they'll summon security so fast it'll make your head swim. Shockingly, they're a bit vague about specifics, but this I can assure you: the changes will be cosmetic and about as effective as a rope handle on a shovel or a colander constructed out of 2x4s or a parka with the pockets filled with pudding. Here's a



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few of the rumored service improvements members of the seven-mile club can expect to see coming to a jetway near you.

• After a plane is stranded for a minimum of six hours of tarmac delay, first class male passengers are allowed to use coach-class bulkheads as urinals.

• From this day on, corporate policy mandates that gate personnel will respond to questions about departure delays with an indecisive shrug instead of a condescending sneer.

• Flight attendants will no longer shriek at passengers "suck sand and die" without first flashing trademark friendly sky smile.

• Gravel used to fill headrests to be pounded into pea-sized fragments instead of marble-sized fragments.

• Once departure delay passes four-hour mark, liquor will be poured directly into passengers' mouths at a 10 percent discount.

• Airsick bags are now double lined and minty fresh.

• Emergency-exit information cards will soon feature four-color illustrations of Cajun artist Rodrigue's lovable Blue Dog.

• Seatbacks to recline a full 13/16 of an inch instead of previous 3/4 of an inch.

• Crying children under age of four will be sequestered in overhead compartments.

• Luggage is certified to no longer arrive late and at a destination other than yours. Now you're guaranteed one or the other.

• Reading lamps will be repositioned to focus on your seat partner's knees rather than your seat partner's feet.

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